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Recorded on 21–23 May 2014 in the Winspear Auditorium at the Murchison Performing Arts Center at University of North Texas, Denton, Texas.
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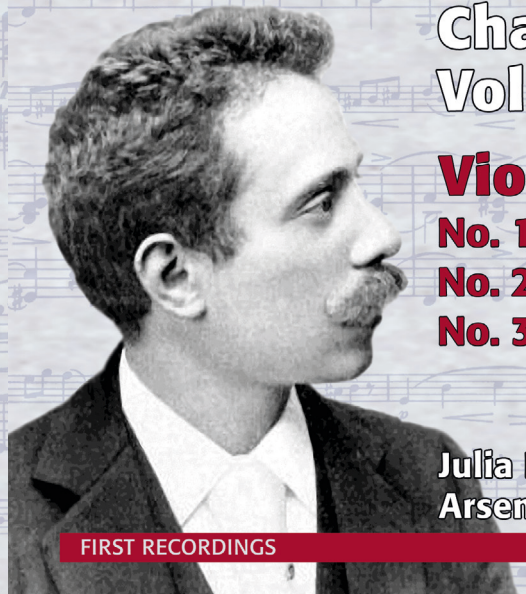
TOCCATA CLASSICS

Robert KAHN



Chamber Music Volume One

Violin Sonatas

No. 1 in G minor, Op. 5
No. 2 in A minor, Op. 26
No. 3 in E major, Op. 50

Julia Bushkova, violin
Arsentiy Kharitonov, piano

FIRST RECORDINGS

ROBERT KAHN, A CHAMBER-MUSIC MASTER IN THE GERMAN *BELLE ÉPOQUE*

by Steffen Fahl

Robert Kahn (1865–1951) grew up in a wealthy German family (he was the fifth of eight children) much involved in the cultural life of Mannheim. The Kahns thought it desirable to provide a public library for the city; it was also their custom to organise regular fora for the analysis and discussion of contemporary literature and music. From his childhood years Kahn's family saw to it that his musical talents were developed in the best way possible, hiring private tutors as prominent as Vinzenz Lachner[1] and Ernst Franck;[2] so it was that, even as a young man, he had already become an accomplished composer. When the seventeen-year-old Robert began his studies at the Königliche Musikhochschule in Berlin, Friedrich Kiel, its professor of counterpoint and composition,[3] found virtually nothing to criticise in Kahn's music.

As early as 1886, at the age of 21, not long after finishing his studies with Kiel, Woldemar Bargiel[4] and Josef Rheinberger,[5] Kahn received recognition and support from the leading

[1] Lachner (1811–93) came from a highly musical background: his father was an organist, and three of his brothers, Franz, Ignaz and Theodor, were also composers; Franz was a friend of Schubert, and he, Ignaz and Vinzenz were friends of Brahms. Vinzenz was active mainly as a conductor, holding a position in Mannheim from 1836, moving to Karlsruhe on his retirement in 1873. His output consists in large measure of vocal music, lieder especially, although it also embraces two symphonies, other orchestral pieces and chamber music.

[2] Ernst Franck (1847–89), a student of Franz Lachner, was an organist, choirmaster and conductor who was one of Brahms' inner circle from 1869. From 1870 to 1877 he was Hofkapellmeister (court conductor) in Mannheim. He enjoyed success as both an orchestral and an operatic conductor. He composed chamber music and also songs and operas.

[3] Kiel (1821–85) had joined the staff of the Hochschule upon its foundation in 1870 and taught some of the best-known composers of the next generation, Paderewski and Stanford among them. He composed predominantly choral and chamber music.

[4] Like Kiel, Woldemar Bargiel (1828–97) – who was Clara Schumann's half-brother – enjoyed a reputation as an excellent teacher; his students included Leopold Godowsky and Paul Juon. His compositions included four string quartets, three piano trios and a number of works for piano. His only symphony and three published orchestral overtures were recently released on Toccata Classics TOCC 0277, played by the Siberian Symphony Orchestra conducted by Dmitry Vasilyev, in the first of a two-volume series that will include all his orchestral music.

[5] The Liechtenstein-born Rheinberger (1839–1901) spent most of his life in Munich; his twenty organ sonatas (of a projected cycle of 24, in each of the major and minor keys) are generally regarded as his main legacy.

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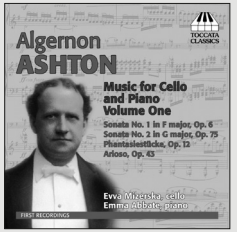

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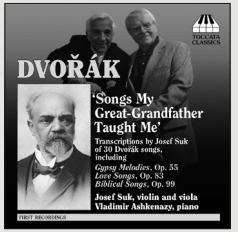

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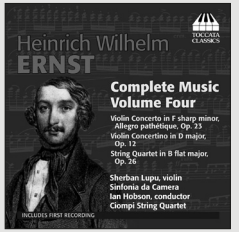

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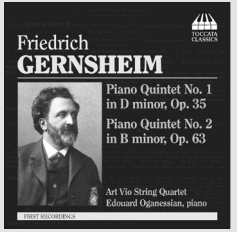

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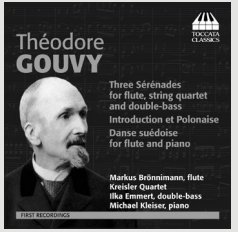

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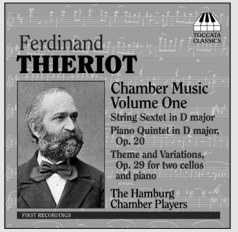

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A prize-winner of national and international competitions, including the 1991 Sergei Rachmaninov Competition (Russia), The 2003 'Slavic Music' Competition (Ukraine), The Beethoven Piano Sonata Competition (Memphis, USA), and the Franz Liszt International Piano Competition (Los Angeles, USA), **Arsentiy Kharitonov** has been heard in solo recitals and concerto appearances in Finland, Germany, Hungary, The Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Sweden, Ukraine and the United States. He studied at the Rimsky-Korsakov College of Music of the St Petersburg Conservatory in Russia, where his musical progress was immediate and astounding. Soon, he was giving solo recitals, which featured his own compositions and brilliant improvisations in a variety of musical styles in addition to the standard piano repertoire.

His first appearances as concerto soloist in Russia included performances with the St Petersburg Philharmonic and the Mariinsky Theatre Youth Philharmonic Orchestra. He recently recorded the second CD of a multi-disc series of music by Leo Ornstein, released internationally by Toccata Classics. The first two CDs in his series of the piano music of Leo Ornstein (TOCC 0141 and 0167) have been released by Toccata Classics to a rapturious response in the press.

representatives of the German Romantic tradition, such as Clara Schumann, Johannes Brahms, Hans von Bülow and Joseph Joachim. He maintained his early success in German musical life, becoming a prominent chamber musician and prolific composer between 1890 and 1930; he is thus an important representative of German music in the *belle époque*. Musically speaking, this period comprised several extremely productive decades before two world wars laid waste the country's once prosperous and flourishing musical life, burying many of her cultural treasures in the rubble of these two disasters and the subsequent political and musical revolutions of the later twentieth century. But Kahn's music can not only help improve the understanding of the music of the *belle époque*; it also underlines a forgotten truth – that music written in the twentieth century wasn't always the product of a violent break with the musical past, but could also be nourished through an intelligent engagement with the Romantic tradition. With his early and extraordinarily close and fruitful relationship with Brahms and his circle, Kahn is a particularly good example of the creative potential which the Romantic tradition still offered in the early twentieth century and which Kahn, after himself becoming a teacher of composition at the Königliche Hochschule, passed on to many famous students, among them Wilhelm Kempf, Karl Klingler, Ferdinand Leitner, Günther Raphael, Arthur Rubinstein, Nikos Skalkottas and many others before his retirement in 1931. Even though he was banned from all public activity on racial grounds with the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 and was eventually forced to emigrate when he was already over 70 years old, he survived all the hardships of his time in exile in Britain, remaining productive well into his old age. He died in Biddenden, in Kent, in 1951. His substantial body of songs, chamber music and piano music remains largely undiscovered.

What made Robert Kahn different from many of the prominent composers of his day was the fact that he demonstrated little desire to write music that was unusual, provocative, scandalous or of overwhelming power; instead, he composed intelligent, vital music in the Romantic tradition which was his natural language. Although he made a thoroughly successful debut as an orchestral composer when Hans von Bülow conducted the symphonic suite *Aus der Jugendzeit,* his first composition for orchestra, with the Berlin Philharmonic in 1890, he soon gave up all ambition to write for the orchestra, focusing above all on vocal and chamber music. Composing in these genres, Kahn had no need to break with tradition for the sake of some pretence of originality. In fact, his use of melody, harmony and form was sufficiently creative and original in itself for him to eschew any kind of scandalous effect or musical revolution.

This is particularly true of Kahn's three sonatas for violin and piano, composed – along with many other vocal and chamber-music works – during his most productive period and premiered in 1886, 1897 and 1907. Like most of the music Kahn composed in this period, they were published shortly after they were written and given successful first performances by top-ranking performers. As is the case with all his chamber output, the violin sonatas benefit from Kahn's wide-ranging experience as a chamber musician: from his early years he had regularly performed alongside the most important German violinists of the age, among them Adolf Busch, Carl Halir, Joseph Joachim, Karl Klingler, Georg Kulenkampf and Josef Szigeti.

Violin Sonata No. 1 in G minor, Op. 5

Kahn's First Violin Sonata, Op. 5, was composed when he was 21 and completing his studies in Berlin and Munich. It is one of the first of the longer works that show his extraordinary ability to combine the large-scale structure of a Romantic sonata with the verve and inspiration typical of a young virtuoso. Although even Brahms found it difficult in his early years to meet the high standards he set himself when composing a sonata, Kahn's first large-scale sonata seems to have been acknowledged as a consummate masterpiece virtually straight away. In 1886 Kahn played the work to Brahms with the violinist and conductor Emil Pauer while Brahms was visiting Mannheim. Kahn later recalled that Brahms, who on occasions acted as page-turner for Kahn, purred like a cat during each movement as he listened to the music.[6] Brahms then issued a spur-of-the-moment invitation for Kahn to go to Vienna for further private lessons in composition and piano. Although in his own opinion the time Kahn spent with Brahms was the most important formative experience in his musical life, he was never in any danger of remaining a mere Brahms disciple. In his later compositions he often went beyond the limits of 'Brahmsian' late Romanticism – and the Op. 5 Sonata, of course, predates their first meeting.

Brahms was not the first – and certainly not the last – to express appreciation of the First Violin Sonata and its composer. Joachim is said to have planned to play it in his London concerts in 1886 and, as is known from her diary, Clara Schumann also met Kahn in the same year, playing the Op. 5 Sonata with the violinist Nuret Koning, which she really enjoyed:

> On the evening of 5 October I played a violin sonata by Kahn with Koning which I enjoyed very

[6] Robert Kahn, 'Erinnerungen an Brahms', *Mannheimer Hefte*, 1986, No. 1, p. 23.

Currently professor of the University of North Texas, **Julia Bushkova** has been a featured performer on numerous commercial and public radio stations including CBS Public Radio (Canada) and NPR's Performance Today (USA). Her most recent solo and concerto performances have taken her to Moscow, St Petersburg, Minsk, New York, North Carolina, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Michigan, Canada, South Africa, Italy and Venezuela. A dedicated chamber musician, Ms Bushkova has participated in festivals across North America as well as in Italy and South Africa.

Born into a family of renowned violinists in Moscow, Julia Bushkova began study of the violin at the age of five and made her concerto debut at the age of fifteen in Poland. She graduated with highest honours (*summa cum laude*) from the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow where she studied with Igor Bezrodny, Zoria Shikhmurzaeva, Konstantin Adjemov and Dmitri Shebalin of the Borodin String Quartet. During this time, she performed in Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria and the former USSR, with concerts in Moscow's Great Hall, the Palace of Congress and elsewhere.

his contemporary Gustav Mahler was simultaneously attempting to combine symphonic and vocal music. An analysis of Kahn's works in this period shows him devising a very individual approach to composition based more on the structural organisation of contrasting types of musical material than on the traditional development of motivic and thematic material.

Although this Sonata again has three movements, Kahn seems to have left the conventions of the classical sonata further behind than in any of his previous chamber works. In this Sonata, too, Kahn connects together the three separate movements by once again including a reminiscence of the beginning of the Sonata in the coda of the finale. It may also seem unconventional to begin a sonata with a slow movement (here an *Andante sostenuto – Presto* 7) instead of a traditional sonata-form movement – like Beethoven's in his two Op. 27 piano sonatas. This *Andante*, moreover, emerges as an ABABA form of sharply contrasting passages, each with its own tempo and connected with the others only through occasional allusions in the figuration. The second movement, *Allegro molto vivace* 8, is a scherzo in traditional tripartite form, the playful outer sections framing a lyrical, only slightly more reserved trio. In the third movement Kahn once again juxtaposes rather than reconciles music of starkly contrasting character. It opens with an introductory *Adagio* 9, the quiet intensity of which makes considerable demands of the performers and sets the scene for the following *Allegro energico*, one of the richest and most virtuosic sonata-movements in Kahn's entire output. The *Adagio* epilogue then recalls not the beginning of this third movement but that of the Sonata as a whole, thus helping unify a work built on stark contasts.

Steffen Fahl wrote his PhD thesis on the life and works of Robert Kahn. His online project, http://klassik-resampled.de, features digital realisations of many rarely or never recorded compositions from the European musical tradition.

Eine deutsche Fassung dieses Texts kann bei www.toccataclassics.com/cd_notes/TOCC0021-cd-notes-de.pdf gefundet werden.

> much – more so than I can remember enjoying anything by one of the younger composers. The piece has passion, warmth, charm and superb workmanship; the only thing is that he follows the example of Brahms and Schumann rather closely, but there's no harm in that if in the process he displays such great talent.[7]

As with almost all Kahn's works over the following thirty years, the Sonata was brought out in the same year by one of the leading German publishing houses, Bote und Bock, in Berlin. Kahn was barely 21 years old when this sonata marked the beginning of a long and successful career as a composer and chamber musician.

Most of Kahn's works feature short, concentrated musical forms such as the *Lied* or character piece. But when Kahn met Brahms in 1886 he also played him a piano quintet (which has not survived, unfortunately); the Op. 5 may therefore not have been his first attempt to meet the challenge of writing a large-scale piece of music in sonata form. Even so, the authority, vivacity and formal mastery of this work are still surprising – and it was just the beginning, albeit a promising one, of a long series of sonatas, trios, quartets and quintets in which Kahn demonstrated on almost every occasion new and innovative ways of conceiving traditional sonata form.

This First Sonata already demonstrated Kahn's particular take on this traditional musical form. Even in the development section of the first movement, marked *Allegro moderato e energico* 1, he is clearly concentrating more on making the structure reflect the contrasting thematic material than on exploring the various ways the themes might be developed and brought into conflict, as one might expect in a traditional Beethoven-style sonata. The first main theme of this first movement (like the thematic material in the last movement) is full of motivic, rhythmic energy, although most of the time Kahn is careful to keep it separate from the contrasting lyrical second theme. The long-breathed melodic writing in the second movement, *Adagio ma non troppo* 2, points to why it was Kahn's *Lieder* in particular that contributed so much to his early success as a composer. The permutations of the thematic material – as exuberant as they are intelligent – on the basis of which Kahn builds the last movement, an *Allegro vivace* 3, demonstrate at more than one point how modern his musical invention can be, even in music so Romantic in style. They also testify that even at the outset of his career Kahn's invention was never limited to a purely Brahmsian-style late Romanticism, even though it had been a major influence on his music.

[7] Berthold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann – Ein Künstlerleben nach Tagebüchern und Briefen*, Breitkopf und Härtel, Leipzig, 1902, Vol. 3, p. 496.

Violin Sonata No. 2 in A minor, Op. 26

When Kahn finished his Second Violin Sonata in August 1896 (it was premiered and published the following year), he was becoming ever better established as a successful composer, lied accompanist and chamber musician in the musical life of Berlin. His standing is reflected in the dedication of the Sonata to Carl Halir, second violin in the Joseph Joachim Quartet, with whom Kahn sometimes performed in Berlin chamber concerts at the time. In 1897, too, Kahn also began teaching at the Königliche Hochschule für Musik – just when the deaths of Clara Schumann (in May 1896) and Johannes Brahms (in March 1897) marked a turning-point in the history of music. And, indeed, from 1897 onwards Kahn set modern poetry by Christian Morgenstern and Gerhart Hauptmann in his songs, thus going beyond the type of poetry featured in typical Romantic lieder. Even though Kahn is still recognisably following a Brahmsian path in his chamber music, he uses 'the language of his master in such a personal way that it always results in something new', as the critic Karl Thiessen put it in 1902.[8] The Second Violin Sonata not only marked a return to chamber music after three years in which Kahn had composed and successfully performed almost exclusively late-Romantic lieder, but also, as a close inspection of the Second Sonata shows, Kahn was now experimenting with the internal formal structure of his chamber music hidden beneath the surface of its Romantic soundscape. His experiments apply to the motivic, thematic and formal conventions of the classical sonata. All three movements, although discernible individually from the changes of tempo marked, are combined into a continuous whole, with a single final bar in the entire Sonata. In addition, the second and third movements are related to the first by various thematic reminiscences.

By way of contrast, this first chamber-music composition to be written after three years of composing lieder shows Kahn adapting the melodic and formal characteristics of lieder-writing. Thus in the first movement, *Allegro* 4, the traditional development section after the exposition is reduced; it is based almost entirely on the passionately romantic opening theme which opens this movement, and the contrasting lyrical second theme occurs only in the exposition and the reprise. In the central panel, a *Moderato* introduction precedes the *Adagio ma non troppo* main section 5, which uses variation to emphasise the soaring melodic line of the violin as it unfolds. The finale, inscribed *Allegro non troppo, ma con fuoco e poco a capriccio* 6, was described by the authoritative Wilhelm Altmann, as 'a kind of Bolero'.[9] But however innovative the structure may be,

[8] *Signale*, 1902, No. 40, p. 764.

[9] *Die Musik*, Vol. IX, No. 24, p. 355. Altmann (1862–1951) acquired a reputation especially for his voluminous writings on chamber music.

Kahn's Second Sonata is no less ambitious and passionately romantic than the Op. 5 Sonata of ten years before.

Violin Sonata No. 3 in E major, Op. 50

When Kahn wrote the last of his three violin sonatas, Op. 50 in E major, in October and November 1906, he was a well-established chamber musician who regularly appeared with the most important instrumentalists of his era. A professor at the Königliche Hochschule für Musik, he was at the height of his powers as a composer. He had been happily married to his wife, Katharina, since 1900 and was the father of three daughters (born in 1901, 1904 and 1906) whom he loved dearly. But he had also, within a short space of time, suffered three family tragedies: the death of his elder brother, Franz (1861–1904), his father, Bernhard (1827–1905), and his mother, Stephanie (1840–1906). Whereas up to this point Kahn's works seem to have been composed first and foremost for public performance, this Sonata was written in the context of his close friendship with Gerhart Hauptmann (winner of the 1912 Nobel Prize for Literature) and the latter's wife, Margarete Marschalk, a gifted violinist and one-time student of Joseph Joachim at the Hochschule. Both were apparently extremely enthusiastic about Kahn's music, as visits by Kahn to play chamber music with them attest. While he was composing the Third Sonata, Kahn reported on his progress to Hauptmann in several letters, expressing his desire to play the new work to Hauptmann with Margarete. After Kahn gave its first public performance with Carl Halir (to whom he had already dedicated his Second Violin Sonata) at the Berliner Singakademie on 20 March 1907, he went on to the play the piece again a little later with Margarete Hauptmann in Hirschberg, a small town near the Hauptmanns' country residence. The success of his musical and academic careers, his growing young family and also the loss of his parents and brother all seemed to have combined to create in him a new musical and personal maturity which enabled him to compose one of the most serious and important masterpieces among his chamber compositions.

Twenty years after the First Violin Sonata and ten years after the Second, Kahn's output was still dominated by lieder. The deep melancholy of his 'Nänie', Op. 44, No. 1, or the 'Funeral Song', Op. 49, No. 2, may hint at the private sorrow which also pervades the *Adagio* of the Third Violin Sonata. But the serious character of the Third Sonata relates not only to the circumstances of Kahn's life, but also its entirely personal concept of form. Kahn had already been experimenting again with traditional forms, attempting to combine elements of vocal composition with those of chamber of music just as